

Firstborn, Seaborn

By: Sheila Finch

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I have always thought of the stories and ballads of the great silkies, their brides, and their children as a product of cold weather, cold water, and rocky coasts. Sheila Finch, as is typical for her, has thought longer and more deeply on the subject, and blended into her story the California that is her adopted homeland and the medieval iconography she has studied.

“Stella Maris,” star of the sea, is one of the loveliest names used to praise the Virgin Mary. But before the Blessed Virgin was the Goddess, tied to the all-enveloping rhythms of the sea. As “Firstborn, Seaborn” shows, it is difficult to remember Her In a world ruled by a God and men who seek to bind what must be free.

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The lights of the bus that brought her to this lonely stretch of California coast dwindled away in the distance, leaving her to the frozen constellations of December overhead and the luminous curls of foam below. She walked down the steps to the rocky beach, her feet sure on the familiar path. She held her breath. Except for the slow hiss of waves sucking at pebbles, the beach lay silent.

Five miles away in the small house in the city, the youngest infant would be whimpering, she knew, seeing it in her mind’s eye. And the man, come home to a cold house and an empty plate, waiting for his woman, drowsing in the chair beside the cradle, another child on his lap. She could not love them, though she had often tried, but she could not hate them, either. She did not have the strength.

She let out her breath and gazed out to the horizon, as empty of feeling now as the night was of sound. A full moon climbed, laying a white path across the water. She took off her shoes and felt the bite of ocean on her bare feet. She hesitated, pulling the thin denim jacket over her stomach, covering the new life flickering in her belly; a spark too small to attract a moth now, later it would be a fire to consume her with its need, as the others had done.

Except for the firstborn.

The Pacific Ocean spread its mosaic of drowned stars before her. Memories slid through her mind like bright fish through a fog of loneliness and despair.

Once, she had been more alive in the water than she would ever be on land. She had worked with dolphins at the marine park, swimming with them, socializing them, readying them to work with the park’s trainers. She had known their kind since her childhood in Mexico, friendly spirits who played beside the children in the warm surf. It was good work, though it grieved her to think of this animal held captive, and

she often thought they must yearn to be free.

The marine park made money, the city thrived on the taxes the park paid, and the management expected the staff to keep their doubts and their worries to themselves. The tourists returned again and again with their children and their children's children; the entrance turnstiles clattered hungrily. The dolphins splashed and smiled and squeaked in their cartoon voices all summer long, and if they entertained any thoughts at all about the situation, their thoughts were silent.

But night after night she lay alone in her narrow bed in a rented room and thought of one dolphin in particular, leaping from flashing water, the sun flaming on his back. She could not forget one windy March day as the seasons turned, feast day of her own naming, when everything had changed. She had entered his pool a dozen times before, but this day was to be different. She had hardly slipped into the water when it turned suddenly to liquid fire, so bright she could hardly see him anymore. She cried out in fear as something ancient and immortal enveloped her in golden haze, a spray of stars flying upward from sea to sky. She sensed its presence covering her, but it did not hurt her. Something that could not be explained away on Sunday morning consumed her at that moment, in a sacrament of light and water. Then it was gone, leaving her with no words to explain or understand what it had given or what it had taken away.

After a while, the park's director noticed the bulge growing beneath her narrow rib cage. In time, he said, his white hand patting her brown one softly on the polished desktop, she might have become one of the best trainers the park had ever known, even if she was a woman. But company rules and the insurance policy give him no choice. He had to let her go. Of course, if she considered—if she would perhaps—well, there were ways. And what, after all, were the options for a poor Latina like herself if she did not take his advice? He waited for her answer, but when none came he said he hoped she would understand how much he regretted this.

She accepted his decision silently, gazing out past the dolphin pens to the sweep of ocean at the park's boundary, opalescent in the setting sun. The director turned away and shuffled papers on his desk. He counted out the bills that were owed for her services. Then he added a few more because he felt sorry for her.

She ran from the director's office and stumbled down the path to the dolphin pen in flooding darkness. The tourists had all gone home. Only the plastic cups rolling over the path, the discarded candy wrappers, the canceled tickets spoke of their visit, and a child's pink shoe forlorn under a bench. She had seen these signs a thousand times before, but today she read them as messages from a world that waited for her outside the gates of her watery Eden.

Along the way, the park's cleanup crew leaned on their brooms and watched her. Last in the line was Manuel, who stood directly in front of her so that she had to step off the path to pass him. He smiled, small, even teeth showing white against his dark brown skin, and put out his hand to catch her arm.

“Where are you going, Maria?”

That was not her name. She had never told any of them her name, except the director when she applied for the job, and he had probably forgotten. It was not that she felt herself superior to the others who worked in the park. But it had seemed unimportant to have a name; there was no one who cared, no place that it mattered.

Manuel had named her Maria, explaining that he had to call her something. He often waited for her after work, lounging in the shadows by the staff gate, catching her arm and walking with her to the bus stop. Sometimes he persuaded her to let the bus go by, and they walked together in the sunset that turned the highway bloodred. Those nights he spoke to her of Mexico. He had come from the Sonoran Desert, but she from a seaside town in Oaxaca, and it was as if they had been born in different countries. She remembered the sound of bells on Sundays that seemed to her as a child to speak of so much glory that never came to pass. She thought the god who lived on those altars must be like an uncle who made rich promises he could not keep at Christmas, then crept away ashamed. She had left home as soon as she was able, making her way to *El Norte*, where it was said some glory could still be found by those who believed.

This evening, when she did not answer him, Manuel released the grip of his fingers, letting his hand slide gently down to brush against the curve of her belly. One finger remained on her body like the admonition of a priest.

“The little one, Maria,” he said, “is not mine. *Malisimo!*”

She went on past him, hearing the scratch of brooms on the path in the twilight, the muffled, jeering laughter of the others, catching the scent of their hair oil over the clean salt of the ocean’s breath.

The water in the dolphin pen was dark and turbulent, a swirl of creamy foam marking the place where the dolphin had submerged. She sat on the wall, her knees tucked under her chin, and waited. He came up directly in front of her in a shower of drops that took the light of the setting sun like a spray of blood. He was a large dolphin, the largest the marine park had ever captured, and the director had named him Rex, and though that was not his name, either, there was a rightness to it the director never dreamed. But he was only a creature of the sea, after all, and perhaps she had imagined anything else. She saw herself caught for a moment in his unblinking left eye, like a caged seabird. He nudged at her toes, and she let herself carefully down into the pool beside him.

At once he rolled over and slid his body along hers, shoving his hard beak between her swollen breasts. She felt the pulsing strength in him, the powerful tail fin thrusting against her thighs. She put her arms about him, and he swam slowly with her around the pen. Now his beak probed her gently, and she let him touch her without fear. The bruises he had inadvertently marked on her arms and legs in the first days of their learning to know each other had long since faded, and she did not

doubt he knew what grew beneath her breastbone. His touch on her skin was as gentle as a lover's, and she leaned her cheek against him, feeling the sleek underbelly sliding over her hips. She felt as if she were alone with him in a timeless infinity of ocean, under a sky so full of sunset colors she could feel the weight of it on her brow. She laid her hand lightly on his blowhole, their signal. One last time, she thought, they would twist and curve in the eddying water, diving and surfacing in the late afternoon light.

But today he jerked away from her touch, so that for a moment she floundered in the tumult of the waves, kicking her feet till she was buoyant again. He swam in tight circles about her, his gaze spearing her like a fish as she trod water, gasping for breath. She opened her arms to him, reaching out with all her senses, yearning to communicate her confusion and her regret, but there was no contact this time. Instead, something rose between them; she heard voices whispering in the dark corners of her mind, felt them like the spidery touch of silk, gone when she turned to look.

Suddenly afraid, she clasped her arms about the dolphin again, and they hung suspended, bubbles beading her legs and his fins like seed pearls. The voices whispered of the sea and its ways which were not the ways of the land, and of a folk who existed long before the painted god came to sit on his altar in her village. She sensed again the power that scoffed at mission bells and human laws, more ancient than either, something that never made promises, whose gifts were dangerous and strange.

"Que pasa?" Manuel's voice wrenched her back. "Someday that fish will drown you!"

Lights pooled yellow among thick shadows in the marine park. Manuel's face was dark under a halo of lamplight, but she knew he was frowning. Pride smoldered beneath his easy smile at all times, swift to explode in flame. The big dolphin slipped out of her embrace and darted close to the pen's rim where Manuel stood, challenging him with a quick squirt of water. The man stepped back, brushing drops from his cheek.

"Come out, Maria. That one is dangerous."

The water was icy, and already she was tiring more quickly than before. She pushed herself through the foamy wake the dolphin had left and reached the edge. Manuel stepped forward and pulled her out. He picked up a towel that lay in a puddle of amber light and draped it over her, covering her belly from view.

"You are a strange woman, Maria! Why do you waste your time with a fish when you can have a man?" He waited for her reply. When she gave him none, he frowned. "One day he will not be here when you come to him! And then you will have to look at me."

Icy water lapped against her knees, shocking her out of the past. All about

her, the tips of waves flashed like shattered crystals, as if someone had taken an axe to stained-glass windows. She turned her gaze outward, away from the memories, to the bright road of possibilities the moon created.

They were out there tonight, the voices, the Old Ones who had once spoken to her of their secrets, the hidden lore beyond anything the good fathers in their brown robes could speak of with authority. She knew that, although she could not see them. They waited at the other end of the moon's white bridge between the worlds of land and ocean. They called to her across the chasm that separated their kingdom of myth and mists from the reality of a woman's life taken and then abandoned. She had not accepted this at first, and in her loss and her despair, she had sought to replace what had been snatched from her, as if it was only a nightmare that could be chased away in a mortal man's arms.

She thought about this as she always did at this time of year. He was a good man, even if she could not love him. He was patient with her, expecting less than the priests had taught was her duty to give, and she could not truthfully say she was unhappy. The small house was warm enough and filled with simple, necessary things, and the comfort of children's voices that almost banished ghosts. But he had carried each one in its turn to the church in the city, ignoring her tears, and dedicated it to the uncle god with empty hands.

It was no more than a dream that haunted her, a bright fantasy she yearned for, she thought, as the Pacific sucked at her legs. The merest moment when something primeval had brushed against her, used her, and gone its way again, leaving her like a shell cast up on the dry sand, out of reach of the tide whose touch it would never forget. There was neither cruelty nor love in the act, which was why it was so hard to be rid of. But how was this better than the priests' god who lived only in pictures on walls and windows?

Yet the moon's path spread its silver coins before her each year, beckoning, and one day she must surely follow it or she would die. Perhaps, she thought, she had died already, consumed in that one explosion of cold fire that had shredded the fabric of her life.

The child fluttered mothlike below her ribs, and for a moment she could not remember which child it was. Then the face of her firstborn rose in her mind.

On the day at the end of December when the last of the money had gone, an icy wind raged in from the northwest, whipping the waves into a fury, battering the foot of the low cliffs of the peninsula on which the marine park stood. In an evening without sunset, gray sky tangled with gray sea at the jagged horizon as she made her way to the dolphin pen. No job, no rent money, meant she no longer had a home; and the city's shelters were full. She did not know where else to go.

The pen was empty. The dolphin was gone.

She did not stay to ask what had happened to him. She never asked for

anything, fearing they would not tell her if she did. Or worse, they would wonder why she wanted to know, and then they would begin to ask questions she could not answer. There was nothing she could explain even if she had wanted to. Perhaps the dolphin had sickened and died, as so many of them did. Perhaps Manuel had made good on his threat.

She left the park in darkness and walked on the beach below the cliffs, slow and heavy now, seeking a place that would give her shelter. At one point the cliffs rose straight up from the water's edge; rocks tumbled across the sand and out to sea, breaking the waves' headlong gallop onshore. One of the larger rocks curved across the sand, preserving a little warmth in the crook of its arm, and here she sat. Exhaustion dragged her down below the surface of fitful sleep.

She dreamed of window glass blazing with winged archangels trampling demons with scales and fins, and of young girls gathered in stiff white communion frocks, dark eyes darting one to the other and lips whispering of boys, while their hands folded dutifully on missals and rosaries, and of the mission priest who spoke to them of Eve's sin and the uncle god's vengeance on Eve's kind.

She awoke abruptly to a tidal wave of pain, and she clung to the sheltering rock till it subsided. The voices of the Old Ones chattered anxiously in her mind, but there was no time to listen to them now. Another wave of pain rolled over her, threatening to tear her apart. She shut her eyes against it. Again and again the force of the child's arrival battered at her, and the voices of the Old Ones argued, cajoled, persuaded, till she gave in, let go and let be.

Eyes closed in a moment's calm, she drifted back into sleep and saw the broken-tiled roofs of the town of Puerto Angel where she had been born, the patched and faded sails of the fishing boats on the Gulf of Tehuantepec, the dusty squares full of scrawny chickens, a mule clopping tiredly around a well, old women, squatting against the mission wall—grandmothers who talked of death and birth and death again in a litany older than the doctrines of the brown-robed fathers. And beyond the town she saw the dark sea itself where her people had once known the Old Ones and both had prospered, before the coming of the priests who smashed the ancient contract, dooming the fishermen to guilt and the Old Ones to despair.

As the winter moon rose full out of the black water, the life within her gathered itself and broke free, gushing out of her into the night. The voices of the Old Ones rose in triumph, then hushed suddenly, as if afraid of their own eagerness. Weak and almost delirious, she fell back against the rock, colder than the stone of the communion table.

The thin cry of the child roused her, and she looked down at it on the sand between her legs. Moonlight frosted the soft fuzz of its head. Its eyes were tightly closed, and its mouth sought from side to side. She lifted it and wiped away sand and blood, then severed the cord with her teeth. She brushed its face free of the caul that clung to it like a frond of gray kelp. She put the child against her breast, but

there was no milk in her yet. She let it suck the dry teat, feeling the strangeness. It closed a tiny fist over her fingers and opened dark eyes to gaze at her. She felt as if she were drowning.

At last the child was satisfied, its eyes closed, its mouth went slack with sleep. She stood up, cradling it in one arm, the other holding the rock, for her legs were as weak as seaweed, and looked out over the ocean.

The Old Ones lay half in and half out of the surf in the shelter of the rock, watching her. Starlight slipped like a mantle over their white arms and crowned their heads, turning their hair to silver flame. They did not move and neither did she. Just beyond the ring of waiting Old Ones, a dolphin leaped, the light radiant on its back.

She stumbled forward over the sand, and at once the Old Ones yearned toward her, hands outstretched in their eagerness for the life which they could not produce alone. She looked down at the infant asleep in her arms, a child that had been given to her to bear but was not hers to keep. She brushed the tip of its moon-washed head with her lips, disengaging the tiny fingers clasped about her own. Then she held it out to them. The moon glinted on the child's naked body, drawing a line of light from the small head, down the arms, over the little chest, to the gentle curve of the tail.

At that, they sighed, a sound like surf hissing over a multitude of small stones. One of the Old Ones, silver hair streaming over her full breasts, took the child from the woman and cradled it. For a moment none of them stirred. Then as if at some signal only they heard, they turned and darted out to sea in a flurry of white arms and scaly tails. But the one that carried the child held it aloft for her to see for the last time before they disappeared under the waves.

"Madre de Dios!" Manuel's voice said behind her. "What have you done, Maria?"

She turned and saw him cross himself against the horror. She stepped back from the revulsion on his face, clasping trembling arms over her slack belly.

"You have killed the child!"

She turned her back on him at that. Westward, a dark shape rose out of the water, blocking the moon, and she thought of the soft face of her firstborn. Regret stabbed sharply through her. She floundered through the surf toward the dolphin.

"No, Maria, no! You must stay! It was I who let Rex go so that you would stay here with me!"

Urgently she flailed at the man's arms that pinned her, imprisoning her in his world. Strained toward the dolphin, Manuel only locked her tighter. Now she saw other dolphins attending the first. But he was larger and stronger than any of them, a primeval spirit who mocked the mission fathers and their painted images. She

yearned to go with him until she thought her heart would burst. The man and the woman struggled silently at the edge of the sea while the stars flared overhead and the moon's path beckoned.

"Perhaps it was well-done," Manuel said at last, panting with the effort of holding her. "The child was not healthy. Even I could see there was something not right"

Far offshore, the dolphin reared up hugely out of the waves, balancing himself on his tail in a blaze of light. She cried out in desperation, and Manuel clapped a hand over her mouth to silence her.

"The police, Maria! What would they think?"

Then the dolphin sank beneath the waves, the others with him, and the child was gone. She leaned against Manuel's shoulder and wept.

"Come home with me, Maria," he said. "I shall give you fine babies, if that is what you want."

The sea was up to her armpits.

So long ago now, she thought, yet the pain still stung like salt water on an open wound. Tears filled her eyes as she remembered how Manuel had crushed her to him that night, banishing the secrets of the sea and anchoring her to the land. The dolphin was gone, the marine park itself was gone now, and California had settled into years of drought and loss. Or was it only she who had sinned and lost? She did not know. Something fierce and awful had gone out of the world and left behind this terrible gaping sadness. She felt as if she knew the answer but was afraid to speak it.

Her skin shriveled from the water's icy touch like the fingers of death. Then she opened her eyes and found his face a hand's breadth away.

"It is the night, *mamacita*. I, too, remember," he said. "But you have never been so far out before!"

He gripped her shoulders and turned her toward the shore, supporting her when she would have stumbled and fallen beneath the waves. The worn blanket he had brought, the same one he carried to her every year like an absolution, lay folded in its usual place on the beach. He wrapped her in it, ignoring his own wet clothes, then led her up the path to the road where the battered sedan stood with its plastic Virgin and Child on the dashboard.

At the top of the cliff she stopped and looked back at the sea. He waited patiently beside her, slowly, grudgingly with the passage of the years accepting there were mysteries he would never understand. The moon was high overhead, but the white path burned between the worlds. Far out on the ocean, a speck moved, a brief flash of fin or tail, and was gone again.

The door's rusted hinges protested as Manuel opened it. The toddler gazed drowsily up at her from the backseat, thumb against his lips, the baby wakeful beside him. Their mouths moved, innocent as birds, their urgent hunger ready to consume her, like the baby pelicans in the fable the good fathers told that sucked the blood from their starving mother.

She hesitated, thinking of her firstborn, seaborn child, but her eyes were caught by the infant god on the dashboard. He was smiling.

"A woman does not thrive in this world, Conception," her *abuela* had said, in the shadow of the mission wall at dusk. "She endures in the cracks between past and present, church and village, sea and land, this world and the other." She had been eight years old and had not understood the old woman's words.

Manuel said softly, "I am trying to make it better. But I am a man, not an angel! Is this so hard to accept?"

She knew he spoke the truth.

"And you are my woman." He patted her stomach, settling her into the car beside him. "We will go home now, Maria Conception."

She sagged against the seat, shivering with cold, thinking of men whose promises were worth nothing because they had nothing, of gods who made promises they could not keep, and of that which never made promises but took what it needed at will.

And she thought of the strength a woman must find to endure against them all.